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The Gazette
THE REVIEW
SECTION B
Letters B6
Macpherson B7
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How Dion stiffened Canada's spine

'There are reflexes now that weren't there before' says man whose job is to face down PQ

ELIZABETH THOMPSON
Gazette Ottawa Bureau

OTTAWA – The phone call came at an appropriate moment. The date was Nov. 25, 1995, and professor Stéphane Dion was in Ottawa to give a talk on the mistakes federalist leaders had made in the campaign for the Quebec referendum a month earlier. Suddenly, out of the blue, came a call from Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

"He asked, 'Where are you?'" Dion recalled. "I said I was in Ottawa. He asked, 'what are you doing there?' I said I was giving a conference to explain to what point the leaders of the No side didn't do a good job. He said, 'Come talk to me right away.'"

"It was a coincidence but I was a few minutes walk from Sussex Drive. So I went to see him and we talked to him and I shared lunch with him and it was there he said, 'I want you at the cabinet table'."

Since Stéphane Dion became Ottawa's intergovernmental affairs minister five years ago last January, Ottawa has profoundly transformed the way it handles its relations with Quebec. Although the recent arrival of Bernard Landry as premier of Quebec has led to a slight gain for sovereignist forces this spring, over the past five years support for sovereignty in Quebec has steadily declined, down to 43.7 per cent in a *Léger Marketing* poll last month from 49.4 per cent in the referendum. And many observers believe Quebecers have less interest in the issue than they used to have.

Dion's speeches and his trademark open letters to the Parti Québécois are just the tip of the iceberg. Dion has also been the driving force behind fundamental changes in the way the federal government operates and how it responds to Quebec's PQ government.

Where once the federal government was reluctant to promote Itself and loathe to dignify sovereignist accusations with a response, now it doesn't hesitate to blow its own horn and it systematically moves to counter even the smallest charge leveled by PQ cabinet ministers.

"Over the past five years we have, nevertheless, changed a lot of things in the mentality here," Dion said in a recent interview. "There are reflexes now that weren't there before."

But Quebec Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Joseph Facal is convinced the changes go deeper – that since 1995 Ottawa has thrown its administration and hundreds of millions of dollars into the battle for the hearts and minds of Quebecers.

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Montréal, je t'aime

Fed up with Quebec politics, seeking respite from a booze-soaked life, former rock-music critic Juan Rodriguez left in 1989 for California's warmth and tranquility. After a brief stop-over in Toronto, he's back. And springtime in Montreal looks good

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

"Beware of what comes out of Montreal, especially during winter. It is a force corrosive to all human institutions. It will bring everything down. It will defeat itself. It will establish the wilderness in which the brightness will manifest again."
Leonard Cohen

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION, TEENA AULAR

Images from Juan Rodriguez's 1970s Montreal: From left, Nick Auf der Maur, Guy Lafleur, René Lévesque, Leonard Cohen. And a drink or two.

At long last, the "brightness" that Montreal's poet laureate of love locates is upon us.

Ah, spring – which, Robert Charlebois once quipped, lasts three days before our all-too-short summer. This was a particularly long winter; then again, we say that almost every year. If winter informs our soul – climate, geography, politics and language often infuriatingly entwined – then spring always makes me look anew at Montreal's peculiarities and passions.

Montreal drove me away abruptly, then slyly drew me back in.

In 1989, I split in a hurry, smothered by the claustrophobic politics of separatism and the thought of another winter. Above all, I was in the best of a long-distance affair with a former Montrealer whom I hadn't seen in 23 years. Now a divorcée with an 8-year-old daughter, she had found her true self in Berkeley, Calif.

She promised that this hard-livin' Montrealer would, too. Besides, the sun shone 320 days a year.

That sweetly impossible relationship ended six months later ("Je ne regrette rien"), and I high-tailed it to Toronto, of all places. "Give it a chance," implored friends who had moved there. Holed up in an apartment-hotel off Church St., I soon counted on daily reruns of SCTV as a saving grace.

But no: the Meech Lake crisis was in full bore ("What does Quebec want?").

I washed it down with obscene amounts of vodka-and-grapefruit-juice.

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Springtime in Toronto had no resonance. As usual, T.O. was a sprawling Squaresville impersonating importance. The omnipresent CN Tower struck me as a very tall "duh." I finally snapped when I spotted a spiffy attaché-carrying businessman hurrying along Bloor – eating his lunch with his free hand. This, I muttered darkly, was no way to live.

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Two days later, I was back in Berkeley. Blessed relief: not a word of Canada's constitutional conundrums. Hippie business types sold tie-dye T-shirts to Japanese tourists on Telegraph Ave. Yuppies paid rapt attention to California-cuisine doyenne Alice Waters excoriating biotech tomatoes. Montreal-style drinking was taboo. Berkeley was good for my health.

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In 1995, while the sun set majestically on the San Francisco Bay beckoning at my window, I stumbled across the C-SPAN feed of referendum night in Montreal. I chuckled at Nick Auf der Maur interviewed from his "office" at a downtown watering hole, mused at people I recognized on the screen, was gripped by the razor-thin margin.

A year later, I decided to check out the post-referendum mood, just for old time's sake. Sure enough, the first person I met on Crescent St. was Nick. He commandeered me into Ziggy's Bar ("You'll love this place.").

I felt like Al Pacino in *Godfather III*:

"Just when I thought that I was out they pull me back in." Back to a winter of discontent?

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These days, my reality check comes riding the 80 bus down Park Ave. I watch young people of all colours converse naturally in two or three languages, taking glee in ironic translingual cleverness, effortlessly switching tongues to nail the right word or phrase (contextually speaking, the obligatory "whatever" and "cool" are apt).

Their use of language has a life of its own, their riffs reflect Montreal's polyglot culture, and its future.

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Police chemist under microscope

Hundreds of convictions, including 11 executions, may be tainted by bungled science

JIM YARDLEY
New York Times

OKLAHOMA CITY – When Jeffrey Pierce was convicted of rape in 1986, he lost his freedom and his family.

He and his wife decided to divorce and she left Oklahoma to raise their twin infant sons as if he did not exist. To survive in prison, he learned to do two things – to mind his own business and to lift weights.

But Monday, after maintaining his innocence throughout the 15 years he spent behind bars, Pierce was freed because DNA testing refuted the crucial testimony against him from an Oklahoma City police chemist long accused of shoddy work and now the focus of one of the most wide-ranging investigations into a police laboratory.

"The citizens of Oklahoma County have been duped," Pierce said outside Joseph Harp Correctional Centre in Lexington, Okla., Monday after a state judge vacated his conviction and 65-year sentence. "The juries have been lied to for the last 20 years. There are going to be a lot more victims."

Pierce left the prison Monday with his mother and his brother, Gary, who fought for years to overturn the conviction. Pierce will soon meet the two sons, now 15, whom he has only seen through photographs since they were infants.

ARRAY OF ERRORS

The longstanding questions about the conviction of Pierce, a landscaper who happened to be near the scene of the rape, helped set in motion the inquiry into the chemist, Joyce Gilchrist. An FBI report found an array of errors in a sampling of her cases, including Pierce's.

Last week, the federal Justice Department began an investigation while Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma ordered a review into every felony conviction linked to Gilchrist to make certain that no one else has been wrongly convicted.

Among those hundreds of cases are 11 in which the defendant was executed and 12 in which the defendant is on death row. Keating has expressed confidence that none executed were innocent.

The investigations into Gilchrist, who analyzed forensic evidence like blood, hair, semen and fibers from 1980 until she was promoted in 1996 to a supervisory position, come as other police laboratory scientists are under scrutiny in Illinois, West Virginia and Florida. But the scope of the investigation into Gilchrist could be unparalleled.

"The truth is finally being known," said Pierce's lawyer, David Autry. "Nobody has listened to us for 15 years and now science has advanced enough to prove what we've known all along: that Jeff Pierce is innocent."

The case dates to May 8, 1985, when a woman was raped inside her apartment by a man she described as having blond hair.

NO PRIOR RECORD

Pierce, who has blond hair, was doing landscaping work in the apartment complex and a police officer initially pointed him out to the victim from a short distance. The woman had only had glances of her attacker, but she told the officer that Pierce was not the rapist. But 10 months later, she identified him in a photo lineup.

Pierce had no prior criminal record, his brother said, other than a disorderly conduct arrest when he was young.

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INSIDE

Has Joe got it?
Norman Spector, chief of staff to former prime minister Brian Mulroney, wonders if Joe Clark has finally got it – you win votes by uniting your forces and sowing disunity among your opponents. *Page B7*

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